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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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China Looks to Upcoming Arkhipov Visit

Summary

If the visit of Soviet First Deputy Premier Arkhipov takes place, the Chinese will do all they can to make it a "success," probably signing a number of new economic and trade agreements. We believe Beijing would like to restore momentum to stalled Sino-Soviet relations in order to enhance China's image of evenhandedness in dealing with the two superpowers and to retain some maneuvering room within the strategic triangle. Neither side has announced the dates for the trip, although they have agreed privately that he would arrive 21 December. The trip could still be jeopardized if the Soviets or Vietnamese undertook provocative military activity that demanded a strong Chinese response. Failing this, we expect Beijing to continue to limit its military activity along the Sino-Vietnamese border for the time being.

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What's Different This Time?

A chain of events led to Moscow's postponement of Arkhipov's earlier visit--originally slated for last May:

- The Soviets had just conducted a joint amphibious exercise with the Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin coinciding with a Vietnamese offensive in Cambodia that provoked China into increasing military pressure on the Sino-Vietnamese border.
- Arkhipov would have arrived in the shadow of Beijing's warm welcome of the US President.

This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] Foreign Affairs Branch, China Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Information is available as of 6 December 1984. Comments and questions are welcome and should be directed to Chief, China Division, OEA [Redacted]

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In response to stepped up fighting in Cambodia and the amphibious exercise, the Chinese sent a naval task force toward the Spratly Islands--several of which are held by Vietnam--and seized at least eight hilltops just inside Vietnam. In addition, the Chinese provided a warm welcome to President Reagan, disregarding Soviet warnings [redacted]

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[redacted] that such a welcome might force Moscow to cancel the Arkhipov visit. [redacted]

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This time, although the Vietnamese dry season campaign in Cambodia is off to an early start, the Chinese response thus far--artillery shelling along the border with Vietnam and a modest increase in propaganda attacks--has been measured. By the same token, Vietnam has not engaged in activities of sufficient scale--either inside Cambodia or along the Thai border--that would demand a tough Chinese response. Finally, the Soviets have undertaken no military activities aimed at China that Beijing might construe as intended to intimidate the Chinese. [redacted]

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A note of caution is in order, however, in assessing whether the visit will occur and if it does, weighing the likely magnitude of its results for Sino-Soviet relations. Both Beijing and Moscow would appear to have compelling reasons to exploit an Arkhipov visit to demonstrate that they have maneuvering room within the triangle, but that is not the only factor in their calculations. The initial visit became hostage to both sides overriding determination to prove that neither could provoke or attempt to intimidate the other with impunity. [redacted]

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Both have taken actions in recent weeks that the other could take offense at. The Soviets, for example, have introduced additional TU 16s at Cam Ranh and have initiated more active diplomacy aimed at reinforcing Moscow's pretensions toward a larger political role in East Asia. The Chinese have established a stronger, more permanent military presence along the Sino-Vietnamese border, have committed themselves to responding to alleged Vietnamese provocations, and are closely coordinating with the Thais regarding Cambodia. Concurrently, the Chinese are continuing to give low-key but nonetheless, provocative publicity to their evolving military relationship with the US. [redacted]

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The military situation on the eve of the Arkhipov visit is less charged than at the time of the initial cancellation, but the fact that Moscow and Beijing still seem intent on playing a "tit for tat" game in the region suggests that broader political and security considerations could upset the apparent logic of the planned visit. The fact that dates for the visit have yet to be formally announced suggests that both sides are unsure of the other's intentions and that the risks and benefits of an Arkhipov visit are still being weighed. [redacted]

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What do the Chinese Want from the Visit?

The Chinese would like this visit to show domestic and foreign audiences that relations with Moscow are not frozen. Beijing also would like to demonstrate that China is not "tied" to the US and retains the freedom to maneuver to its advantage within the Sino-Soviet-US triangle.

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Indeed, Beijing may want to balance an anticipated visit of several high-ranking US military officers in January, a visit that will lend new impetus to the evolving US-China military relationship. [redacted]

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To a certain extent, a reasonably successful visit by Arkhipov would provide the leadership elbow room for further progress in the US-China security relationship. The visit should assuage those in Beijing wary of overreliance on the US, and who presumably argue that Beijing should keep its Soviet option open. At the same time, others inside the leadership might believe such a visit is useful as a signal to Washington that China cannot be taken for granted. [redacted]

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The Chinese possibly also hope that such a visit, because it would coincide with Vietnamese military operations in Cambodia, might exacerbate tensions between Hanoi and Moscow. The Chinese apparently believe that Moscow pressed Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach--during his trip to Moscow in late October--to act with restraint in Cambodia before and during Arkhipov's visit to China. Beijing replayed in its domestic media the communique issued after the Thach visit, which called for the Soviets and Vietnamese to "synchronize their political watches," a passage suggesting Soviet concern that Vietnam could still disrupt Arkhipov's trip. [redacted]

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Finally, although remote in our view, the Chinese may hope to induce the USSR to engage in bidding against the US for Chinese favor. Although Beijing almost certainly recognizes that this is unlikely, they may calculate that Moscow--concerned about evolving US-China military relations--might offer more than would have been the case earlier. At a minimum, the Chinese--frustrated over Soviet refusal to address the security issues that divide the two sides--want to see what economic inducements to better ties the Soviets have to offer. [redacted]

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The Chinese Cannot Lose

In Beijing's view, Moscow's agreement to send Arkhipov while the Chinese still hold Vietnamese territory already represents a diplomatic victory. In that sense, Beijing almost certainly derives satisfaction from the irritation this is causing Hanoi. Moreover, Beijing probably feels that it has driven home the point to Moscow that it will not be intimidated by Soviet bluster. [redacted]

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Even if the trip were cancelled, China would not lose much. China's room for maneuver within the triangle would not be enhanced but the Chinese would be quick to point up their continued readiness to normalize relations and other established forums of Sino-Soviet consultations are unlikely to be affected. The leadership in Beijing has already decided that economic modernization will be accomplished with US and Western technology, and do not believe that the Soviets can be of much assistance. [redacted]

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In short, we believe the Chinese are prepared to put the trip at risk by reacting firmly to any provocative Soviet or Vietnamese military activity around their periphery. If the Vietnamese were to launch large-scale attacks in Cambodia involving intrusions into Thailand, for example, the Chinese would retaliate. By the same token, if the Soviets decided to

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mount a show of force against the Chinese, either along their mutual border or elsewhere, Beijing is likely to respond with a counter-demonstration of its own. Beijing's objective would be to force Moscow to make a difficult choice between again postponing the visit--and allowing Beijing to reap a propaganda victory by placing the onus on Moscow--or to go ahead with the trip despite the Chinese action. [redacted]

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It is less likely, in our view, that the Chinese are planning to mousetrap Arkipov by allowing him to come and then launching an unprovoked offensive against Vietnam during his stay. Such a step would not promote Chinese security interests. Indeed, it would belie Beijing's claim that it sincerely seeks to normalize Sino-Soviet relations, and would deny Beijing some additional room to maneuver inside the strategic triangle, undercutting China's "independent" foreign policy. [redacted]

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